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# On Rereading Klaus Theweleit's Male Fantasies

## Abstract

Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* has generated broad interest in the literature of several academic disciplines. His analysis of the symbolic and gender dynamics of the leaders of the German *Freikorps* (German paramilitary mercenary units of the period 1918-1923) has been widely generalized into a theory of modern masculinity. Two issues inadequately explored in Theweleit's work nonetheless must be read through more recent empirical and theoretical work in history and sociology: (1) the formative role of colonial military experience in the careers of the German Freikorps officers who provide the material for his analysis and (2) the complex historical problem of the facticity of rape in *Freikorps* activity.

## Keywords

Klaus Theweleit, Male Fantasies, Mannerphantasien, Freikorps, German colonialism, soldierly men, masculinity, rape

## Disciplines

German Literature | Inequality and Stratification | Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Other Sociology | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

## Comments

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### **On rereading Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies***

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## On rereading Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*

In 1977 and 1978, a small leftist Frankfurt publishing house, Stroemfeld/Red Star, published Klaus Theweleit's *Männerphantasien* [*Male Fantasies*], which he had written as his thousand-page, two-volume University of Freiburg dissertation. The book attracted substantial notice in both the academic and the popular press, and in 1980 Rowohlt, the most important publisher of quality trade paperbacks in German, brought out a slightly revised edition. Translated into English in the later 1980s, it has remained in print, and an academic bestseller, ever since. In it Theweleit pursued a wide-ranging examination of the structure and symbolism of a number of literary works and memoirs by men associated with the violent *Freikorps* (free corps) movement of nationalist quasi-mercenaries in Germany in the years immediately after the First World War. He built his reading of these documents – identifying their authors as “soldierly men” – into a theory of both the roots and consequences of proto-fascist and fascist masculinity.

The academic interest that has accrued to Theweleit's analysis of the “soldierly men” of early twentieth-century Germany can be traced to its method: it combines disciplinary approaches from sociology, psychology, literary studies, and history. The individual methods of these four areas are all approached with impressive depth and rigor, and scholars with allegiances to any of them will recognize successful and persuasive investigational and rhetorical strategies in the work. The methods of these four fields are also put into productive juxtaposition through Theweleit's discussion of his own personal investments in disciplinary methods and discourses. To highlight these personal moments he opens the work with a preface containing a reflection on his own

past, and then turns in the opening chapter to the autobiographical and historical-literary narratives of seven leading “soldierly men” of the 1920s and 1930s. He then brackets an extensive literary and historical analysis of these discrete and personal documents of the perpetration of violence with disciplinary reflections from two academic spheres: the sociological and the psychological. From sociology he takes the methods of Max Weber and Norbert Elias, and iteratively immerses himself in empirical materials drawn from a wide variety of historical and comparative sources. From psychology he takes the reflections of post-Freudian psychoanalysis, especially those on early childhood development, and builds from them a theory of how proliferating modes of social and educational discipline and self-discipline shaped the young German “soldierly men.”

The men whose writings Theweleit plumbed deserve, perhaps in a historically unique way, to be designated as perpetrators. The *Freikorps* movement with which they associated themselves terrorized the cities and border regions of Germany in the years immediately after the First World War in attempts to secure both the interior and the borders of the state against the possibility of lasting communist revolution. Theweleit argues that these men emerged incompletely individuated from the militarized acculturating institutions of late nineteenth-century imperial Germany. They therefore approached what they perceived to be threats to the integrity of both their nation and their bodies with a kind of thoroughly disciplined annihilating violence – violence that sought to efface any recognizable trace of the imagined or real adversary and that bore a systematic symbolic ordering revealed in their many forms of fantasy production. Engaging post-Freudian psychoanalytic writings of the 1960s and 1970s, including Margaret Mahler, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michael Balint, and Melanie Klein,

Theweleit traces the development of the flawed subjectivities of the soldierly men to the military academies and officer training institutions that formed a unifying experience for most of them.

Nonetheless despite the creative ambition of Theweleit's analysis and its positive reception in many fields, his theorization of the fantasy productions of the soldierly men of the *Freikorps* has two major but almost completely unacknowledged gaps. The first of these gaps emerges from his failure to explore the experiences that many of his "soldierly men" had outside Germany before the First World War: many of them participated vigorously in the perpetration of annihilating violence in the German colonies in Africa during the 1890s and 1900s, and in the German imperialist intervention in China during 1900-1901, after the so-called Boxer Rebellion. The second gap is an artifact of Theweleit's intense focus on the fantasy life of his soldierly men: he fails to analyze the question of the reality of rape as a weapon in the arsenal of the *Freikorps* men. Together these two issues mean that *Male Fantasies* must be approached with care and skepticism, and its conclusions must not be hastily generalized or applied across historical phenomena or periods. Nonetheless Theweleit's method retains both vigor and rigor, and represents a kind of critical inquiry that perhaps best earns the name critical theory, for when read carefully it encourages and stimulates precisely such care and skepticism.

The first volume of Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* is primarily concerned with the ways in which the "soldierly men" defined the boundaries of their own bodies, and therefore the visible edges of their own masculinity, through a symbolic ordering of the women with whom they came into contact and conflict. For these men, women became embodied symbols of male anxieties about the porous and disintegrating boundaries of

both their own bodies and the state with which they identified themselves, Germany. The soldierly men therefore faced and engaged women with the only technique their experience and training had given them: annihilating violence, both literal and symbolic. They were incapable of expressing love for or experiencing intimacy with women. This was despite their copiously expressed love for horses, guns, hunting, shooting, their native villages, homeland soil, the German *Volk* and other men – especially other soldierly men above or below them in rank and fellow soldierly men who fought and drilled with them (Theweleit 1987, 60-2). The soldierly men therefore split women into virtuous, distantly supportive, asexual, physically unavailable, non-threatening “white women” (mothers, sisters, white nurses, and abstract images of virtue), and immoral, threatening, erotic, sexually promiscuous and potentially castrating “red women.” They desired to reduce “red women” (sexual, working class, available women) to “bloody pulps.” Theweleit argues that the soldierly men were not erotically driven: they did not seek sexual release, even through rape – at least in their fantasy productions and representations, as will be discussed below. Instead they sought murder and destruction, especially when carried through to the utter annihilation of the perceived threat. They viewed themselves as a rigid bulwark, wall, or dam blocking other flowing, changing, evolving things. The soldierly men did not fight specific political enemies or seek to accomplish specific political ends. The manifest content of propagandistic renderings of enemies therefore had no significance to the soldierly men, since their symbolic ordering of war was not directed towards resistance to a specific enemy. Critical theory’s focus upon ideology is therefore largely irrelevant to Theweleit. The physical objects of the soldierly men’s destructive impulses could be any kind of military enemy, the so-called

“red women,” working-class socialists, or pleasure-seeking men. In their fantasy production, however, it is women’s bodies that become the primary locus of destructive aggression and annihilating violence.

Theweleit’s focus on the soldierly men’s discipline of themselves, the boundaries of their bodies, and their surroundings – marked as dangerous through visible differences of race, gender, and class – is at once the most fascinating and most troublesome aspect of his work. In the preface to volume one of *Male Fantasies* Theweleit immediately sets the stakes of the issue of self-discipline while introducing the key themes and symbolic moments that structure his analysis. He does so by retelling a significant moment in his relationship with his father. Theweleit explains that his father, Bruno Theweleit, perceived his work as an employee of the German Imperial Railways to be not only a profession, but to define him completely: he was a railway man “in body and soul” (Theweleit 1980a, 1). Theweleit believes that when his father spoke of the railway, he spoke not as if he were simply an employee of it, but as if he in fact *were* the railway itself (Theweleit 1980a, 1), with all its potential both to liberate human activity and to destroy it. The railway system as the clearest civilian correlate of German military culture therefore reveals a priori how the fantasies of the soldierly men of the *Freikorps* propagated throughout German institutional practices and cultural values.

Theweleit then logically turns to the personal in the writings of the soldierly men themselves. He consciously navigates his narrative between the analytical and the personal, and between the specificity of personal narratives and the general symbolic order common to the groups and cultures he analyzes. He spares no sphere of fantasy production from critique either, whether those fantasies be sadistic, apocalyptic,



orgasmic, or utopian; whether they can be associated with the right or the left; whether they are enacted, recorded, represented, performed, or imagined. This skepticism drives Theweleit to seek psychological explanations that do not reify or truncate the complexities of fantasy life through structural or mechanistic models. He is therefore allergic to Freudian terms like projection (which distracts from the internal dynamics of fantasy-production through self-discipline), repression (which seems far removed from the violent reality of the soldierly men's acts), the Oedipus complex (which Theweleit sees, following Deleuze and Guattari, as more of a historical than a psychological form of explanation, and one that cannot make sense of deep crises and failures of individuation in earliest childhood conditioned by violence-mediated educational institutions like those of Imperial Germany), and the death drive (which looks like a cop-out in the face of the dialectically complex forms of both self- and other-oriented violence perpetrated by the soldierly men). The post-Freudian critical theorists like Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich also offer him little, because their libidinally mediated, redemptive theories of culture seem too general to provide an account of the both self- and other-oriented violence of the soldierly men. Theweleit is similarly allergic to thinkers on the political left who are unwilling to see in themselves and their methods, subject as they are to the same conditions of modernity as were and are the soldierly men, similar dialectical seeds from which sprout the fantasies of the pure, armored male body and the opposition as an undifferentiated, suffocating flood.

Despite the recurring and almost uniformly positive citation of Theweleit in many academic fields – any search in psychological, sociological, historical, or cultural studies indexes will turn up scores of recent references – both Theweleit and his readers have

almost completely ignored the historical reality of the *Freikorps* leaders who provide the immediate material for Theweleit's analysis. They had practiced their violent, liquidating methods of the discipline of themselves and others in the German colonies. Many, if not most, of the leading organizers of the *Freikorps* who were old enough between 1890 and 1910 to have participated in the military interventions in the German colonies did so, including several of the men analyzed most thoroughly by Theweleit. By 1890, Germany had become the colonial master or protective authority in the regions that now form the African countries of Namibia (German Southwest Africa), Tanzania (German East Africa), Cameroon, and Togo, and also held concessions in the South Pacific, New Guinea, and in the Chinese port city of Qingdao. Due to Germany's latecomer status as a nineteenth-century colonial power – and its subsequent loss of all colonial concessions after the First World War – historians long downplayed or ignored the significance of colonialism in German domestic politics or in the relations between Germany and other European nation-states.

Recent scholarship has substantially revised this conventional historical wisdom, however, especially in relation to German military culture. Between 1871 and 1914, the German military fought no wars on European soil or seas. Nonetheless the German military was, like those of other colonial powers, highly active in suppressing what was perceived to be disorder in the colonies. Sometimes this was done through expeditionary units trained in Germany, but more often through colonial 'protective troops' (*Schutztruppen*) managed by German officers but including a range of regular army, marine, and locally recruited personnel from indigenous groups. Military expeditions by

these units resulted in the “penal” application of a kind of annihilating violence that tended ever closer to genocide through the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s.

Isabel Hull has recently studied the practices of the German military in these colonial wars closely, and has concluded that they express a continuous trajectory in the development of German military culture from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 through the First World War. This culture had several features that all tended to contribute to an inner logic that drove German military practice ever more in the direction of a symbolic vision of total order emerging from total victory. The practices of the German officer corps developed into a transmissible culture in cadet schools, in the training and planning exercises of the General Staff, and in Hull’s analysis crucially through experience in forms of colonial conflict in which the adversary was marked by racial difference, and therefore by discourses of innate military and individual inferiority (Hull 2005, 3, 57n55, 170). Theweleit’s soldierly men are the best exemplars of this historical trend.

Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, a major source for both Theweleit and Hull, served in both Africa and China. He provides the most thorough evidence of the implication of colonial experience in the development of the symbolic and pragmatic ordering of the soldierly men’s understandings of themselves and their bodies in conflict. He served as adjutant to Lothar von Trotha, the “outspoken racist” who was military governor of Namibia in 1904 and 1905 (Hull 2005, 30). Trotha pursued a policy of extermination against the Herero ethnic group, and Lettow-Vorbeck’s diary entries questioning Trotha’s quasi-genocidal orders provide dramatic evidence of the development of military practice and its constitutive interrelation with racism in Namibia (Hull 2005, 40, 72, 89, 132-33,

147-48). Most of the Herero died when they were driven into the desert and prevented from returning after what was meant to have been a European-style pitched battle of flanking actions at Waterberg in August 1904. Survivors were interned in concentration camps (Hull 2005, 55-85).

Trotha's practices did not pass without comment in metropolitan Germany. The Social Democratic leader August Bebel denounced them strongly and publicly in the *Reichstag*, and indeed Trotha was eventually relieved of his command. Nonetheless his annihilationist approach to military practice had left its mark on the lives and practices of his men, who in fact approached not only their adversaries but also their own bodies with the liquidating violence that Theweleit describes. Trotha's mentality emerges in its clearest statement in a letter of October 1904 to Chief of Staff Alfred von Schlieffen in Berlin. It demonstrates Theweleit's claims about the liquidating character of the fantasies and fears about the mortal danger of any breach in the boundaries of the soldierly man's body: "Therefore, I think it better that the [Herero] nation perish rather than infect our troops and affect our water and food. [...] This uprising is and remains the beginning of a race war, which I already predicted in my reports to the chancellor on East Africa..." (Hull 2005, 59). Hull also notes the bodily correlative of what she – paralleling Theweleit – calls "symbolic overload" in the German officers, and recounts the "myth of Captain Klein," who ostensibly so vigorously pursued the Herero after the Waterberg battle that he himself died miserably of typhus from drinking contaminated water after his own supplies had run out and he had continued his militarily fruitless but symbolically self-disciplining pursuit (Hull 2005, 144-45).

The second gap in Theweleit's analysis emerges from the fact that he has nothing substantive to say about rape as a real or symbolic weapon either in the fantasy lives or the physical arsenal of the soldierly men. This problem stems not primarily from inadequate attention to historical detail, but rather more centrally from Theweleit's psychoanalytically structured argumentation. His focus on the symbolic order of the fantasies of a discrete and carefully delineated group of soldierly men is in many ways well justified, but still it seems to recapitulate the privileging of male experience and activity that many critics have seen in psychoanalysis itself. As masculinity studies have developed as a subfield, recent scholarship has generally accepted Theweleit's lack of interest in the lived experience of women as adequately grounded – though German feminist scholarship by scholars and writers like Christa Reinig of the 1970s and 1980s was highly critical of it (a point extensively noted by Theweleit himself in the German paperback edition of his book; e.g. Theweleit 1980a, 158). Rape as act, however, vanishes almost entirely from the book.

Only one short passage in the book seems to raise the issue of the facticity of rape in the practices of the *Freikorps* men – and in doing so immediately appears to dismiss it.

It remains unclear why the arousal is so great that it arrives at a state of perception that one can call hallucinatory.... It is still more puzzling why the [emotional] affect appears to have vaulted past a step. For it could certainly appear 'logical' if the soldiers were to cognize the sexual arousal that emerges from the red nurses by calling out: now we're going to rape them. But that *barely* happened (in the novels and in the historical events). Thus the question remains why the former desire for love has transformed itself in the interim into a lust for killing, and has

not unloaded itself in rapes, as one might have been able to conjecture (Theweleit 1980a, 162; emphasis original; transl. Amidon).

It appears that Theweleit accepts the representational absence of rape as real absence, and thereby passes over the possibility that in the narratives of the soldierly men out of which he builds his reading, silence about the practice of rape could be as necessary an element of fantasy production as were proliferating images of liquidating violence. The soldierly men needed to fantasize that their armored body-boundaries could not be breached through physical or sexual contact of any kind, and they therefore could not allow rape into their imagination – despite its now-undeniable reality as an element of German military culture, especially in the colonial conflicts in which the leading soldierly men rehearsed their practices. Nonetheless as long as the practice of rape was mapped with sufficient distance onto other elements of the soldierly men’s fantasy lives, it could and did happen without threatening their fantasized integrity. It could even reinforce that integrity when it became a means for reinforcing a symbolic order with clear markers of insider and outsider status. The distinction between “red nurses” and “white nurses” that is so central to Theweleit’s analysis represents such an ordering.

Unfortunately for Theweleit, his sources in the 1970s could not inform him of the prevalence of rape as disciplinary and military practice in early twentieth century Germany, and especially in the German colonies. Recent research has begun to fill this gap, though there is much still to learn. Hull dedicates only a short passage to the problem of rape in the German colonies, but it is a significant one. Surveying the recent German scholarship on the problem of the deployment of rape in military contexts, she concludes that

unlike plunder, the rape and sexual coercion of women appears to have been widely tolerated in non-European theaters of war. It was a standard feature of the war in China among all the allied troops. It appears to have been ubiquitous among German soldiers in SWA [South-West Africa] too (Hull 2005, 150). She does not pursue the question of whether European-trained military men would have tolerated and pursued rape outside Europe, but still refrained from it within Europe. Nonetheless her next sentence reveals how the central stakes of this question bear on Theweleit's project: "The memoirists always denied it..." (Hull 2005, 150). These memoirists are, of course, precisely the soldierly men of the *Freikorps*, and particularly Lettow-Vorbeck, whose extensive writings provide crucial evidence for both Hull and Theweleit. Just as the soldierly memoirists denied the reality of rape in the colonies, so too, apparently, did they do so in Europe. Ruth Harris has provided the most subtle analysis of the problem of rape among the armies of the First World War, particularly the German army in France, and has concluded that rape happened extensively, but that it was constantly the subject of a symbolic transformation that cast attention away from real women and the violence perpetrated upon them.

Remarkably, although Theweleit himself does not pursue the consequences of the issue of rape in *Male Fantasies*, the problem returns in his later work. Almost as if he wished to compensate for his displacement of the problem in *Male Fantasies*, in the early 1980s he gave a series of lectures in the United States in which he spoke about the experiences, memoirs, and writings of the German author, physician, and memoirist Gottfried Benn during the later part of the Second World War. Theweleit's reading of Benn's writings and letters hinges on rape, and in particular on the suicide of Hertha

Benn, the writer's wife, who apparently so feared the rapes perpetrated upon German women by the Soviet army at the end of the war that she took her own life when it appeared that the small town to which her husband had sent her would be overrun by Soviet troops (Theweleit 1985). Thus silence about rape in Theweleit's work has passed into the sphere of women's fantasies. Theweleit's work has therefore come full circle, and arrived at a point where women perpetrate violence upon themselves on the basis of their own fears and fantasies about men's fantasies. He further sees this complex of embodied meaning and symbol as a constitutive element in Western culture. He builds his reading of the Hertha Benn-Gottfried Benn relationship into an argument that the central fantasy of all of Western high culture – as represented through Benn's equation of himself with the grandeur of that tradition in his wartime poetry – is that culture's perpetration upon the bodies of women. Theweleit has gone on to produce a sprawling and still growing multi-volume reflection on this theme, already counting some 3500 pages, and entitled *Buch der Könige [Book of Kings]*, in which he devotes reflection of truly extraordinary length, depth, and scope to how culture and perpetration grow together in the literature of Benn, Ezra Pound, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and many more.

Approaching Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* with the necessary care and thoroughness, then, leads to a number of conclusions about how his methods and conclusions can be applied, generalized, or made available to the study of social phenomena beyond the soldierly men of early twentieth-century Germany. Firstly, it must be borne in mind that the perpetrator-character of the small group of individuals upon whose narratives and memoirs he built his study was even deeper and more thoroughgoing than he himself recognized. The insights of more recent scholars about



the prevalence both of violent colonial experience and the use of rape as a weapon among the men of the *Freikorps* therefore provide additional concrete support for much of Theweleit's complex web of argument. At the same time, however, those insights emphasize that in an analysis that turns upon the proliferation of symbolic structures and acts, it is possible to forget that the discrete character of those symbolic moments in the lives of individuals will not always submit to correlation with theoretical reflection, no matter how subtle. The apparent contradiction between the narratives of the *Freikorps* leaders and the reality of the use of rape as a weapon under their leadership provides a significant reminder of this issue. Theweleit also reminds us that the institutions that acculturate individuals to violence can emerge not only from state order, but also from anti-state and non-state actors. In the twenty-first century, as new electronic media make available fantasy worlds of intense, gender-marked perpetration-play, as real-time news cycles are deployed and manipulated to provide an endless stream of violence-saturated imagery, as debates about the places of men, women, and sexual and gender minorities in military, paramilitary, and quasimilitary groups gain visibility, as loosely organized non-state organizations dedicated to the perpetration of violence proliferate, and as state actors therefore reciprocally justify the escalation of both violent action and new forms of institutional acculturation to the perpetration of violence, the form and the content of Theweleit's analysis retain their challenge and their richness.

Theweleit's project, therefore, remains a demonstration of the central insights of critical theory. Symbolic order is meaningful, because all social acts generate it. Furthermore, despite many challenges, it is possible to make sense of that symbolic order, both theoretically and through the empirical relationships between social action and

violence. Finally, scholars must recognize that their analyses are part of that symbolic order, and that their work can escape the realm of the reflective and enter the realm in which order and perpetration merge. Only through such recognition might scholarship still hold the prospect of liberation through discipline.

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